

# A wing and a prayer

By bridging 'the hungry gap' with supplementary feeding, we can breathe life into our declining farmland bird populations, but farming practices must be changed to secure their future, says **Hannah Bourne-Taylor**

Illustrations by Fiona Osbaldstone







**L**ISTENING to a dawn chorus when surveying birds by song, I tune into one little voice pealing out from a dense thicket on this Cotswolds farm. Tiny lungs belt out notes in rapid succession: a garden warbler has flown from southern Africa back to *this* thicket—*his* home. His tune is part of a chorus of warblers, indicating that the farm is great for birds in the spring and summer. Walking along the hedge, more avian voices ring out: yellowhammers and linnets and then the classic song of skylarks, which are so high up they seem like feathered astronauts.

This is an average-sized, mixed-arable, non-organic farm. Hedgerows, managed for wildlife conservation with sward trims, provide nesting habitat for many farmland birds. Come summer, wildflower headlands will provide insects and seed where the birds can safely forage, flitting from the hedge, yet there are fewer farmland birds, both in terms of species and abundance, compared with local farms with similar habitat. What's the difference? Quite possibly, winter food provision.

**‘Some 3,000 birds on 60 sites are fed with 60 tons of seed grown within the cluster’**

This farm is a great example of the gap that needs to be bridged for the birds. It's exemplary for summer and autumn habitat, but it's falling short on winter food provision. It does have a few winter seed crop plots, albeit small ones, courtesy of the Sustainable Farming Incentive scheme. Containing brassicas, legumes, cereals, grasses and herbs, they provide some bird food into the early winter, but a little-known fact about these plots is that they are depleted by January. Winter is known as the 'hungry gap' because there is simply not enough food to keep all the birds alive in those months, so many will starve to death.

Farmland birds on the Red List, threatened with national extinction, include tree sparrow, corn bunting, ciril bunting, turtle dove, grey partridge, yellow wagtail, starling, linnet, lapwing, yellowhammer, skylark, corncrake and curlew. Research by the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO) shows that supplementary winter feeding and retaining unsprayed stubbles into spring have a positive impact on farmland birds. Skylarks prove it: having declined by 60% due to agricultural intensification, ➔

**Help that makes a difference: skylarks, grey partridges, tree sparrows and yellowhammers need feeding in the hungry gap**





**Farmland birds on the Red List, such as starlings, can be helped by supplementary feeding, planting wildflowers and cover crops and leaving stubble until the spring**

agri-environmental schemes, such as winter food provision, could be reversing the trend, as their numbers have increased by 9% over the past decade. 'We can help with monitoring and can subsidise surveys, although we are happy to support farmers with advice if they want to do it without us. Our interest is in promoting best practice,' says Gavin Siriwardena, head of terrestrial ecology at the BTO.

Micro-charity Farmland Bird Aid Network (FBAN) has one premise: keep birds alive by broadcasting supplementary feed every morning from December to spring, as well as restoring habitat so such feeding becomes unnecessary. FBAN was set up by retired childminder Louise Spicer after she realised the winter food deficit and, for 20 years, local farmers, landowners and volunteers have established feeding sites across Oxfordshire. Forty farmers from the North-East Cotswold Farmer Cluster feed flocks on their land, often taking their children with them, creating a new tradition. Some 3,000 birds across 60 sites are fed with more than 60 tons of seed grown within the cluster, ensuring the birds make it through winter. Surveys conducted on FarmED (a brilliant farming-regeneration hub) showed a rise from 44 to 84 species between 2014 and 2020, thanks to the combination of winter seed crops and extra feeding. 'By growing our own feed, we can help overwintering birds more cost effectively and at scale,' notes the cluster's founder, Tim Field.

Is supplementary feeding a sticking plaster? 'Nationwide change in farming practices is needed,' points out Mike Kettlewell, one of the cluster's trailblazing farmers. 'We feed the birds because if we don't, they'll vanish for good. It has happened before my eyes—a decade ago, there were tree sparrows, but no longer.'

## **'We feed the birds because if we don't, they'll vanish for good'**

Mr Kettlewell's farm illustrates that non-organic farms can support birds, using field margins, hay meadows and hedgerows. Pockets of farmland across the UK champion birds, as at demonstration farms such as the Barker brothers' in Suffolk and the RSPB's Hope Farm in Cambridgeshire. The Wiltshire Tree Sparrow Recovery Project, begun by ornithologist Matt Prior in 1999, has extended farmers' reach beyond food provisions. By installing 1,200 nest boxes over more than 40,000 acres, tree sparrows increased from 30 pairs to 158 pairs by 2018. The Game & Wildlife Conservation Trust holds the Big Farmland Bird Count annually, measuring the impact of conservation work, as well as advocating the importance of helping farmland birds.

Collective research and actions are summed up well by Jake Fiennes. The conservation director of Holkham estate in north Norfolk

(and author of *Land Healer*), Mr Fiennes is hell-bent on farmland-bird restoration. 'It's nonsense that non-organic farmers can't or don't support wildlife. Any farmer can quickly transform their farm for birds without it costing more, by eliminating insecticides from April 1 and not topping up the summer herbicides,' he points out. 'Pure grass margins can be turned to wildflower havens that also provide winter seed, making use of strips of land without encroaching on crops. Seed suppliers do "bumble bird mixes" that allow the summer and autumn food provisions to be drilled simultaneously. Catch crops and winter cover crops post-harvest provide additional cover and winter food provision and unfashionable winter stubble can do wonders,' he explains, without taking a breath.

As I walk, the birds sing. I smile. The farmer here has decided to extend winter bird-seed crops, dig small ponds, change the margins into autumn food provision strips and feed the birds in the cold months. A neighbouring farm has a 17-acre winter seed plot to which seed is added once it's depleted, the spectacle of linnets worth standing in minus temperatures for. Come next winter, this farm will cater for them, too. I spy a male yellowhammer, his spring plumage bright like a splendid sun. When the warblers have left, I will meet this yellowhammer again, with seed that will spell the difference between life and death. As the skylarks sing, I think of the farmers who champion them, remembering the final verse of Percy Shelley's *To a Skylark*: 'Teach me half the gladness that thy brain must know, such harmonious madness from my lips would flow./The world should listen then, as I am listening now.' The chorus filling my ears is a soundtrack of hope for the future and one that will grow with the reward of acknowledging the farm is their home. 🐦

*Hannah Bourne-Taylor is the author of 'Nature Needs You: The fight to save our swifts' (Elliott & Thompson, £16.99; Books, May 7). For the Farmland Bird Aid Network, visit <https://farmlandbirdaidnetwork.org>*

## **Diving into extinction**

The Farmland Bird Indicator, developed by the British Trust for Ornithology, is part of the Government's annually reported suite of biodiversity indicators. Long-term monitoring reflects decline in bird species between 1968 and 2021, including turtle dove (right; 99%), tree sparrow (93%), yellowhammer (64%), corn bunting (83%) and grey partridge (92%). Visit [www.bto.org](http://www.bto.org)

